

The Million Dollar Mystery

By HAROLD MAC GRATH

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"I don't know, sir. A messenger brought it, saying it was for Miss Hargrave."

"Let me see if there is a card." But Jim searched in vain for the card of the donor. At once all his suspicions arose. "Don't touch them. Better let the maid throw them out. Fruit from unknown persons might not be the healthiest thing in the world."

"What do you think?" "That in all probability they are poisoned. But there's no need trying to prove my theory right or wrong. Ask Jones. He'll tell you to throw them away."

"Horrible!" Florence shuddered. "But they do not want to poison me. I'm too valuable. They want me alive."

"Who can say?" returned Jim gloomily. "They may have learned that they cannot beat us, no matter what card they turn up. I may be wrong, but take my advice and throw them away. . . . Good Lord, what's that?" started.

"Some one cried!" "O, Miss Florence!" exclaimed the maid, terror-stricken as she recalled Susan's act. "Miss Susan took a peach from the basket and was eating it on the way to her room!"

"Good heavens!" gasped Jim. "I was right. The fruit was poisoned." Jim had heard enough to send for a specialist he knew. The specialist arrived about twenty minutes after Susan's first cry. To his keen eye it looked like a certain poison which had for its basis the venom of the cobra. "Will she live?"

"O, yes. But she'll be a wreck for some months. Send her to the hospital where I can visit her frequently. And I'll take that peach along for analysis. No police affair?"

"No. We dare not call them in," said Jim.

"That's your affair. I'll send down the ambulance. Keep her quiet. She'll have a species of paralysis; but that'll work off under the treatment. A strange business."

"So it is," agreed Jim grimly. Florence knelt beside her friend's bed and cried softly.

"You called me just in time. An hour later, nothing would have saved her. She would have been paralyzed for life."

Jim accompanied the doctor to the door and went in search of Jones. He found the taciturn butler eyeing the fruit basket, his face gray and drawn, though his eyes blazed with fury.

"Poison!" "A pretty bad poison, too," said Jim. "We can't do anything. We've just got to sit still. But in the end we'll get them. That she devil."

"No, my friend; that she devil. The woman is mad over him and would commit any crime at his bidding. But this is his work. We want him. He wasn't without courage to send this fruit, knowing that I would instantly suspect the sender. Yet, I have no definite proof. I could not hold him in court in law. He will have bought the fruit piece by piece, the basket in a basket shop. He will have injected the poison himself when alone. Poor Susan! That messenger was without doubt some one over whom he holds the threat of the death chair. That's the way he works."

Jim tramped the room while Jones carried the fruit to the kitchen. The butler returned after a while.

"What about that blank sheet of paper?" "It has to be dipped into a solution; after that you can read it by heating. I have already dipped it into the solution. The moment the heat leaves the sheet the writing disappears again. The ink is waterproof. I'll show you."

Jones got a candle from the mantle, lit it, and held the sheet of paper very close to the flame. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, letters began to form on the blank sheet. At length the message was complete.

"Dear Hargrave—The Russian minister of police is at the Black hotel under the name of Henri Servan. He is investigating the work of the Black Hundred in this country and can free you from their vengeance if you supply the evidence needed."

"Now, what evidence can he want?" asked Jim.

"Such as will prove Braine an undesirable citizen."

"And then?"

"Quietly pack him off to Russia, where he is badly wanted."

"Who sent this message?"

"One of our mysterious friends. We have a few, as you already know. But I'll go and make this man Servan a visit. I have seen the real minister, and if this man is the same one, something of importance may turn up. I shall want you somewhere about here. I'll let you have this letter. Remember, heat brings it out and cold air makes it vanish. Now I'll go up for a moment to see how that poor girl is getting along. We are lucky; there's no ginsaying that."

"You're a clever man, Jones," said Jim.

Jones turned upon him, his face grave. The two men looked steadily into each other's eyes. Jones was

first to turn aside his glance, as he had something to conceal and Jim had nothing.

When the ambulance took the tortured Susan away, Jones addressed Florence gravely.

"I am going out and so is Mr. Norton. Do not leave the house; not even if you have a telephone call from me or Norton. Both of us will return; so don't let anything bother or confuse you."

"I promise," said Florence, struggling with a sob.

Jones went downstairs again, paused by a window as if cogitating, and suddenly threw it up and looked abroad. A rustle among the lilacs caused a smile to flit across his face. So they had sent some one to learn the effect of the poison? Or to follow him should he leave the house? He retired to the kitchen and gave some



Letters Began to Form on the Blank Sheet.

explicit orders to the chef, orders which did not in any way refer to cooking. Then Jones and the reporter left the house, each quite aware that they were being followed. Near the Blank hotel they separated in order to confuse the stalker. He might dodder and follow the wrong man. But it was evident that this time he had been directed to follow Jones; for he entered the hotel a minute after Jones.

Meantime a second spy, whom Jones had not seen, had observed the transfer of the invisible writing and had immediately informed Braine, who was not far away. That his poisoned fruit had stricken down an outsider troubled him none at all. But that mysterious message he meant to have; it might be a life and death affair, it might be a clue to the treasure, or the whereabouts of Hargrave.

Thus, while only one man followed Jones, several kept a far eye on Jim. Jones scribbled his name on a blank card and had it taken to the Russian's room. The page eyed that card curiously. It was different from anything he had ever seen before. In one corner were written three or four words which resembled a cross between Hebrew and Greek.

"Humph!" muttered the boy. "Whadda y' know about that? Chicken scratches; but I guess the bell rings Koslan. On your way, Hortense," he cried to the hall maid, who wanted a look at the card. "Up t' the room, sir. He'll see yuh!" The boy kept the silver salver extended expectantly, but Jones went past without apparently noticing the hint.

The Russian was standing by a window when Jones knocked and was hidden to enter.

"You are not Hargrave."

"Neither are you the Russian minister of police," urbanely.

"Who are you?"

"I am Hargrave's confidential man, sir."

The two men eyed each other cautiously.

"You speak Russian?"

"No. I am able to scribble a few words; that is all."

The Russian lit a cigarette and smoked leisurely. He was in no hurry.

"No, I am not the minister; but I am his accredited agent. I am empowered to bring back to Russia a man who is known here by the name of Braine, another by the name of Vroon, and a woman who calls herself a countess and unfortunately is one. All I desire is some damaging proof against them that they are outlaws in this country. The rest will be simple."

"They have all three taken out naturalization papers."

The Russian waved his hand airily. "Once they are in Russia those documents will never come to light. This man Braine, it has been learned, has long been in the pay of Prussia, and has given the general staff of that country many plans of our frontier fortifications. I do not know what any one of the three looks like. That is why I sought Hargrave."

"I will gladly point them out to you," said Jones, rubbing his hands together, a sign that he was greatly



Jones Paused by a Window.

pleased. "That will be very good of you, I'm sure," in a rumbling but perfectly intelligible English.

"And suddenly they all three will disappear?"

"Suddenly; and you may believe me that from that time on they'll be heard of never more."

"All this sounds extremely agreeable to me. Mr. Hargrave will be happy to hear that his long enforced hiding will soon come to an end."

"All you have to do, sir, is to point them out to me."

"It may take a week or ten days."

"My government has waited for ten years to gather in this delectable trio. A month, if you like."

"The sooner the better. I shall call this evening after dinner. We shall begin with Mr. Braine; and generally where he is the woman Vroon will be the most difficult."

"After dinner, then, since you know some of his haunts. There is a reward."

Jones laughed shortly. "Keep it yourself, sir. Mr. Hargrave would willingly double whatever this reward is to eliminate these despicable creatures from his affairs."

"Thanks."

While this conversation was taking place Norton idled about; and feeling the cravings for a cigarette, prepared to roll one, only to find that he hadn't the "makings." So fate urged him to step into the nearest tobacconist's.

He asked for his favorite brand and passed over the silver.

Braine and his companions saw Norton enter the shop. It agreed with their plans perfectly. The tobacconist happened to be afflicted with the order. So they hurried into the shop. Jim instantly realized that he was in a trap.

"How can I get out of here?" he whispered to the tobacconist.

The latter smiled. "I have to obey these gentlemen. I don't know what they want you for; but if I made a move to help you I should find my own throat cut without saving yours."

"The devil!"

Jim made a dash for the rear door, to find it locked. Even as he fumbled with the key, Braine and his companions flung themselves upon the reporter and overpowered him.

"Ah, my friend Braine!" he said.

"My friend Norton!" jeered the victor.

"And what do you want; some peaches?"

"A paper, my friend, a little secret of paper with invisible writing on it. We promise to give you something in exchange for it."

"What?" asked Jim with as much nonchalance as he could assume.

"Life."

"Search," said Jim. "You won't object to my smoking?" He began to roll a cigarette while they passed over him. He struck a match; the pleasant aroma of tobacco floated about his head.

"He's got it on him somewhere. I saw him take it. He's got his nerve with him."

The cigarette glowed. Jim smoked hurriedly.

Through every pocket they went. The contents of his wallet lay scattered at his feet, his watch dangled from the chain. The cigarette grew shorter and shorter. Suddenly one of the men stretched out a hand and whisked the cigarette from Jim's lips. He threw it to the door and stamped out the coal.

"I thought so!" he exclaimed, holding out the scrap of burnt paper towards Braine.

The words "Dear Hargrave" were all that remained of the message. With a snarl of rage Braine whipped out his revolver.

"I will give you one minute to tell me what that paper contained."

"And after that minute is up?"

"A bullet in your stomach."

Quick as a flash Jim's hand shot out, caught the loosely held revolver, gave it a wrench, and brought it down savagely upon Braine's head. Then he reversed it and backed toward the front entrance.

"Au revoir, till we meet again, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER XXI.

A Packet of Papers.

Jim said nothing at first about his adventure to Jones, whom he met half an hour later.

"Was it necessary to keep that in-

visible letter?" he asked.

"No," said Jones. "Would it have given our affairs a serious turn if it had fallen into alien hands?"

"Decidedly," answered Jones. "It would mean flight for the Black Hundred or a long time under cover. If our friend Braine learned that Russia was now taking an active interest in the doings of the Black Hundred. And eventually all our work would have to be done over again."

"Ah!" "You look a bit mused up. Anything happened?" asked the keen-eyed butler.

"Nothing much. I made a cigarette out of the letter and smoked it."

Jones chuckled. "I see that you have had an adventure of some sort; but it can wait."

"It can."

"Because I want you to pack off to Washington."

"Washington?"

"Yes. I want you to interview those officials who are most familiar with the extradition laws."

"A new kink?"

"What I wish to learn is this: Can a man, formerly undesirable, take out naturalization papers and hold to the protection of the United States government? That is to say, a poisoner, menaced by Siberia, becomes an American citizen. He is abducted and carried back to Russia. Could he look to this government for protection? That is what I want you to find out."

"That will be easy. When shall I start?"

"As soon as you can pack your grip."

"That's always packed," replied the reporter. "You see, I'm eternally shunted hither and yon, at a moment's notice, so I always have an extra grip packed for quick travel."

"The Russian agent wants Braine, Vroon, and the countess; and tonight I'm going to try to point them out to him. It would satisfy me more than anything I know to eliminate this precious trio in Russian fashion. It's thorough; and once accomplished, good-day to the Black Hundred in America. The organization in Russia has still some political significance, but on this side of the water it is merely an aggregation of merciless thugs."

"I'll take the first train out. But you will tell Florence?"

"Surely."

"And take care of your own heels. You were watched at the hotel."

"I know it; but the watcher could learn nothing. Henri Servan as a name will suggest nothing to the fool who followed me. Besides, we both knew that he was trying to peek through the keyhole. That hotel, you know, still retains the old-fashioned key-holes."

"To keep the maids in good humor, I suppose," laughed Jim. "Well, I must be on my way to make that flyer."

The two shook hands and Jim hurried off. The butler watched him till he disappeared down the subway.

"He's a good lad," he murmured, "and a brave lad; and money is only an incident in human affairs after all. I'll be a good angel and let the two be happy, since they love each other and have proved it in a thousand ways."

Meanwhile the Russian agent settled down before his writing portfolio; and once or twice as he wrote he thought he heard a sound outside the door. No doubt this butler of Hargrave's had been watched and followed. By and by he rose, drew his revolver, and tiptoed to the door obliquely so that the watcher outside might not become aware of his approach. Swiftly he swung back the door and the member of the Black Hundred stumbled into the room. Almost instantly the Russian caught him by the collar and held him up.

"What were you doing outside my door?"

The man did not answer. He was trying to collect his thoughts.

"A spy of some sort, eh?"

"I'm a detective," said the man finally, thinking he saw his way clear.

"And what did you expect to learn by looking through the keyhole of my door?"

Servan laughed. "Show me your badge of authority."

The man fumbled in his upper pocket, hoping against hope that the muzzle of the revolver would waver.

"You're an ordinary thief," declared the Russian; "and as such I shall instantly hand you over to the hotel authorities unless you tell me exactly who and what you are."

The man remained dumb. He hung between the devil and the deep sea. If he told the truth the organization would soon learn the truth; if he kept still he would be lodged in jail, perhaps indefinitely, for he hadn't a savory police record. Presently his nerve gave way in face of the steady eye and hand, and he confessed the why and wherefore he had sought the keyhole of Servan's room.

"We are after this butler. Wherever he goes we follow."

"Well, you've wasted your time, my man. All I am here for is to take over some property Mr. Hargrave left in France for sale. I know nothing about your private feuds. Now, get out. But keep out of my way; I am not a peaceful man."

The spy tumbled out as he had tumbled in, by an act of gravity; and Servan was alone. He spent two days in comparative idleness. Then things began to wake up.

For a long time the leather box across which was inscribed "Stanley Hargrave" lay in peace undisturbed. A busy spider had woven a trap across the handle to the quaint lock. The box was still badly stained from its immersion in the salt water. At

a certain time it was quietly withdrawn from its hiding place. It was stealthily opened. A hand reached in and when it withdrew a packet of papers was also withdrawn. The box was again locked and lowered; and presently the spider returned to find that his cunning trap had been totally destroyed. With the infinite patience of his kind he began the weaving of another trap. Perhaps this would be more successful than its predecessor.

Later Henri Servan received a telephone call. He was informed that his purpose in America would be realized by his presence at such and such a box that night at the opera. Further information could not be given over the telephone. Servan seemed well satisfied. He dressed carefully that evening, called up the office clerk and inquired if his box tickets for the opera had arrived. He was informed that they had. Instantly the spy, who had dared to linger about the hotel, overheard this conversation determined to notify Braine at once. And at the same time, Norton, in disguise, determined not to lose sight of this man whom he had set himself to watch.

The spy left by one entrance and Jim by another. Jim had learned what he desired: that the Russian agent would be followed to the opera and that it was going to be difficult to hand the documents to him. The spy entered a drug store and telephoned. Jim waited outside. When the man came out he strolled up the street and entered the nearest saloon. Jim's work was done.

It was Braine's lieutenant, however, who took the news to Braine.

"We have succeeded."

"Good!" said Braine.

"He will go to the opera. He will have a box. Doubtless they have arranged to deliver the papers there."

"And the next thing is to get the number of his box." This Braine had no difficulty in doing. "So that's all

fixed. He calls himself Servan and registers from Paris. I'll show the fool that he has no moult to deal with this time."

"And what are these documents?" asked Olga.

"Ah, that's what we are so anxious to find out. Some papers are going to be exchanged between this Russian spy and Jones or his agents. That these papers concern us vitally I am certain. That is why I am going to get them if there has to be a murder at the opera tonight. Norton has been to Washington. He was seen coming out of the Russian embassy, from the secretaries of state and war and a dozen other offices. I've got to find out just what all this means."

"It means that the time has come for us to fly," said Olga. "We have failed. I have warned you. We have still plenty of money left. It is time we folded our tents and stole away quietly. I tell you I feel it in my bones that there is a pit before us somewhere; and if you force issues we shall all fall into it."

"The white feather, my dear?"

"There is altogether some difference between the white feather and common-sense caution."

"I shall never give up. You are free to pack up and go if you wish. As for me, I'm going to fight this out to the bitter end."

"And take my word for it, the end will be bitter."

"Well?"

"Oh, I shall stay. You know that my future is bound up in yours. In the old days my advice generally appealed to you as sound; and when you followed it you were successful. From the first I advised you not to pursue Hargrave. See what has happened!"

"Enough of this chatter. I've got to die some time; it will be with my face toward this man I hate with all my soul. You trust to me; I'll pull out of this all right. You just fix yourself up stunningly for the opera tonight and leave the rest to me."

Olga shrugged. She was something of a fatalist. This man of hers had suddenly gone mad; and one did not reason with mad people.

"What shall I wear?" she asked calmly.

"Emeralds; they're your good luck stones. You will go to the box before I do. I've got to spend some time at the curb to be sure that this Servan chap arrives. And it is quite possible that our friend Jones will come later. If not Jones, then Norton. I was a fool not to shoot him when I had the chance. We could have covered it up without the least difficulty. But I needed the information about that paper. With Norton going to Washington and Jones conferring with this Servan, I've got to strike quick. It concerns us, that I'm certain. Perk up; we've lots of cards in our sleeves yet. Be at the opera at eight-thirty. Pay no attention to any one; wait for me. Remember, I shan't write or send any phone messages. Be wary of any trap

like that to get you into time your

Olga approached the touching

"I have important business to attend to tonight. Under no circumstances leave the house. I shall be followed. And our enemies will have need of you far more tonight than at any previous time. I shall not send you phone or written message. You have your revolver. Shoot any strange man who enters. We'll make inquiries after."

"We are near the end?" whispered Florence.

"Very near the end."

"And I shall see my father?"

Jones bent his head. "If we succeed."

"There is danger?" thinking of her lover.

"There is always danger when I leave this house. So be good," the butler added with a smile.

"And Jim?"

"He has proved that he can take care of himself."

"Tell him to be very careful."

"I'll do so, but it will not be necessary," and with this Jones set forth upon what he considered the culminating adventure.

The usual brilliant crowd began to pour into the opera. Braine took his stand by the entrance. He waited a long time, but his patience was rewarded. A limousine drove up and out of the door came his man, who looked about with casual interest. He dismissed the limousine, which wheeled slowly around the corner where it could be conveniently parked. Then Servan entered the opera.

Braine hurried around to the limousine. The lights, save those demanded by traffic regulations, were out. The chauffeur was huddled in his seat.

"My man," said Braine, "would you like to make some money?"

"How much?" listlessly. The voice was muffled.

"Twenty."

"Good night, sir."

"Good night and good morning!"

"A hundred!"

"Now you've got me interested. What kind of a joy ride do you want?"

"No joy ride. Listen."

Briefly the conspirator outlined his needs, and finally the chauffeur nodded. Five twenties were pressed into his hand and he curled up in his seat again.

Servan entered his box. In the box next to his sat a handsomely gowned young woman. He threw her an idle glance, which was repaid in kind. Later, Braine came in and sat down beside Olga.

"Everything looks like plain sailing," he whispered.

Olga shrugged alighly.

During the intermission between the first and second acts, Servan took the rear chair of his box, near the curtains. Braine, watching with the eyes of a lynx, suddenly observed the curtains stirring. A hand was thrust through. In that hand was a packet of papers. With seeming indifference Servan reached back and took the papers, stowing them away in a pocket.

Braine rose at the beginning of the second act.

"Where are you going?" asked Olga nervously.

"To see Otto."

A bold attempt was made to rob Servan while in the box, but the timely arrival of Jim frustrated this plan. So Braine was forced to rely on the chauffeur of the limousine.

As Farrar's last thrilling note died away Braine and Olga rose.

"Be careful. And come to the apartments just as soon as you can."

"I'll be careful," Braine declared easily